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BY RICHARD ELLIS

How Not To Blow It

IF YOU'RE GOING TO PREACH THE FAIL GOSPEL, FAIL WITH INTEGRITY

When I started ghostwriting for entrepreneurs in 2013, celebrating "failure" was in vogue. Startup founders bragged about how epically they messed up and what they learned—though it's worth noting, most only boasted about their failures after making boatloads of money.

Not all fails are made equal, however, and not all who preach the Fail Gospel practice it faithfully.

In 2013, Breathometer became the first startup on ABC's Shark Tank to convince all five "sharks" to invest. The founder pitched "the world's first smartphone breathalyzer" that plugs into the headphone jack of a smartphone and tells the user not only their blood alcohol content (BAC) but how long it will take to sober up.

The founder delivered a masterful pitch. He asked the sharks to imagine they were at a dinner party and poured them all champagne. He then raised a question later highlighted in a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) complaint: "You have some drinks and . . . the most important question is--are you safe to drive?"

To get an answer, simply plug Breathometer into your audio jack, activate the app, blow, and see your BAC. The purpose of the device, said the founder, was "to help people make smarter and safer decisions."

A bidding war ensued and ended with billionaire Mark Cuban investing $500k and the other sharks contributing a combined $500k for a



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total of $1 million. Breathometer would go on to raise funding from billionaire Richard Branson as well.

By the time I briefly got involved, Breathometer had launched an updated breathalyzer, the Breeze--allegedly "a law enforcement grade product utilizing a next generation electrochemical fuel cell sensor that has undergone rigorous government lab-grade testing to ensure its accuracy"--and they wanted PR help launching a device called Mint, a bad breath detector.

Mint seemed less impressive than Breeze. I mean, is it that hard to tell if your breath is terrible? Of course, Breathometer had a grander vision. Our breath, they claimed, has over 300 detectable biomarkers. Mint was a step towards building a health monitoring platform that could measure blood glucose levels, detect bacterial infections, predict asthma attacks, and more. It was an idea ripe for terrible slogans like, You Don't Know Until You Blow (what a missed opportunity...).

Anyway, we tried to build Breathometer's founder into a so-called thought leader. One piece, drafted in mid-2015, was about business lessons from the founder's billionaire mentors: Mark Cuban and Richard Branson. "Fail Fast" was one of their supposed tips. "The sooner you understand what's not working, the sooner you'll arrive at a working solution," we wrote. "Therefore, the key is to iterate quickly and ship frequently. Building something that provides value to its respective market will require multiple attempts and failures."

Here's the irony: by 2014, Breathometer knew that Breeze had a problem. Investigators would refer to it as "downward drift." Basically, Breeze told you your BAC was lower than it actually was—the worst thing a breathalyzer could possibly do to its trusting users. Breathometer came up with a "working solution" to this fail: multiply all the BAC results by 1.2 before sharing them with users. Clearly a "law enforcement grade" device.

As a blogger for the FTC wrote, "Then in early 2015, Breathometer conducted tests that turned that initial uh-oh into a full-scale OMG."

Breathometer determined that ambient humidity and temperature interfered with the accuracy of results, and sensor accuracy also degraded over time. By then, they'd sold over $2 million worth of Breezes.

According to an FTC complaint, Breathometer stopped selling the Breeze but didn't tell its retailers partners, like Amazon and Best Buy, why it was discontinued. Nor did Breathometer alert customers who, presumably, were using Breeze to determine whether they were too intoxicated to drive.

Only after the FTC began its investigation (in 2016) did Breathometer warn retailers and users of the accuracy problem—and eventually deactivate the breathalyzer function on its app. To settle the FTC's case, Breathometer agreed to notify and refund everyone who'd purchased its breathalyzers.

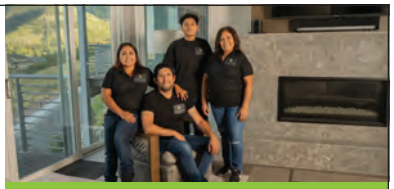
In a 2022 interview, Mark Cuban called Breathometer his "worst" investment in all his years on Shark Tank—not because of the BS device, but because the founder was having too much fun and spending too much money ("I'd look at his Instagram and he'd be in Bora Bora ... Two weeks later, he'd been in Vegas partying ...").

You wouldn't know that Breathometer was a financial and ethical failure from how Breathometer's founder told the story on LinkedIn. As of this writing, his profile boasts about how he gained recognition as a "Reality TV Star" on Shark Tank and lists over 20 news outlets and publications where he appeared pushing a product that didn't work and endangered users.

There should be no celebration for those who fail and attempt to hide the truth for the sake of financial gain and their fragile ego. If you're going to blow it, blow it with integrity.

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